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ON-THE-RECORD BRIEFING

**Acting Coordinator of Counterterrorism Ronald L. Schlicher and
Deputy Director for Information Sharing and Knowledge Development of the
National Counterterrorism Center Russell Travers
On the Release of the Country Reports on Terrorism 2008**

**April 30, 2009
Washington, D.C.**

(1:31 p.m. EDT)

MR. AKER: Good afternoon, everyone. It's time again for the annual report on terrorism, which is congressionally mandated. And we're very pleased today to have with us the Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism Ronald Schlicher, and the Deputy Director for Information Sharing and Knowledge Development of the National Counterterrorism Center, Russell Travers. They will make some opening statements and then they'll take your questions.

MR. SCHLICHER: Thank you very much. And thank all of you for coming out this afternoon for the rollout of the Country Reports on Terrorism for 2008. Now please bear in mind that the report covers events that transpired from January 1 to December 31, 2008. Please also bear in mind that these reports fulfill a congressional requirement. But we believe that the publication also is a very, very useful tool for stimulating discussion, for serving as a reference point for policymakers, for the press, for our partners in the international community, and for the public at large. It gives a very good idea of the challenges that we face in the counterterrorism field, of the progress we've made, and of the problems that still need to be addressed effectively.

So let me begin, please, by summarizing some of the key points that are presented in the report's opening chapter, which is called the strategic overview. Al-Qaida and al-Qaida associated networks remain the greatest terrorist threat to the U.S. and to its partners. And since September 11th, al-Qaida and its allies have moved across the border to the remote areas of the Pakistani frontier, and they're using, of course, that mountainous terrain as a safe haven, where they can hide, where they can train, where they can communicate with their followers, where they can plot attacks, and where they can make plans to send fighters to support the insurgency in Afghanistan. Therefore, Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas – FATA for shorthand – are providing al-Qaida with many of the benefits that it once derived from the base that it had across the border in Afghanistan.

Though still very dangerous, al-Qaida in Iraq has experienced significant defections. It's lost key mobilization areas. It has suffered disruption of support infrastructure and funding. And it has been forced to change its targeting priorities in some instances. The number of suicide bombings in Iraq, which we find to be a key indicator of the operational capability of the group, those numbers fell significantly in 2008. And very importantly, tribal and local leaders in Iraq continued to encourage Sunni tribes and local citizens to reject al-Qaida and to reject its ideology.

An emerging hotspot over the last year is Somalia. We find that to be a significant challenge. The group, Al-Shabaab, is a terrorist group with ties to al-Qaida. And as you know, it has overrun the southern and central parts of the country, and Somalia's newly established unity government remains in need of more substantial international support to face this and its other challenges.

Moreover, in Somalia, press reports suggest that foreign extremists have traveled to Somalia to fight along local militants where they could also be further radicalized and pose a threat to the international community. The international community is increasingly focused on the many dangers that develop in the absence of a place without any effective government control, such as Somalia, where, of course, we see such problems as terrorism, as piracy, as narcotics trafficking, as human rights abuses, and the development of ideological extremism.

Another area outlined in the report this year: the group al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb. In Algeria, that group has killed scores of people and it's continued its shift towards al-Qaida trademark tactics such as suicide bombings, the use of improvised explosive devices, and the targeting of U.S. and Western interests.

In Yemen, the security situation continued to deteriorate. Al-Qaida in Yemen carried out several attacks against tourism and against the Yemeni Government and U.S. targets. The most notable attack, as you may recall, was the September 17, 2008 suicide bombing at the U.S. Embassy in Sanaa that killed 18 people. There were a half dozen other attacks in Yemen, conducted by this group, that included a January attack that killed two Belgian tourists and two Yemeni drivers in the southern governorate of the Hadramaut. Now, there was an August raid that the government conducted on an al-Qaida Yemen cell that resulted in the death of the leader of that cell. The Government of Yemen did conduct that raid, but they have so far been unable to disrupt other al-Qaida Yemen cells.

Now, in 2008, we judged that the United States, working with our allies and partners around the world, have made progress in countering terrorism. Al-Qaida leaders in Iraq and Pakistan were killed, terrorist leaders were kept on the move, kept in hiding. Dozens of countries passed new counterterrorism laws or strengthened their preexisting counterterrorism laws, laws that provide law enforcement and judicial authorities with new tools that will bring terrorists to justice. Worldwide efforts to combat terrorist financing have been quite successful. And in the case of al-Qaida, we think that they have contributed materially to the fact that al-Qaida, in recent pronouncements, has actually been soliciting money. At the same time, more must be done.

We believe that a key element in pursuing an effective counterterrorism strategy is in countering violent extremism; that is, the ideological component of terrorism. This is a policy priority for the United States. We feel that there is not necessarily one pathway to radicalization and that there are many underlying factors that underlie a radicalization process. We do think that susceptibility to violent extremist messaging can stem from feelings of marginalization, from alienation, and the perceived relative deprivation of one's community. So we see that for the alienated, extremism sometimes offers a sense of belonging; for the bored, extremism can often offer meaning and excitement; and for the unemployed, sometimes it can even provide a means of sustenance.

Now, we have all been saying for some years now that hard power alone is not enough to prevent violent extremists and their ideologies from gaining legitimacy and traction. So in that sense, hard power buys us time. But smart power – that is, the holistic approach that we've been seeking for several years now in our global counterterrorism efforts – provides us a full range of tools – diplomatic tools, economic tools, military tools, political, legal, cultural tools. Smart power, of course, also comprises working effectively within alliances and within partnerships. You know, so we believe that in a very real sense, the perceptual battle is as central, and in many instances more central than the physical battle against extremism. Success requires prevailing in the ideological and the intellectual arenas.

Now, another important point on counterterrorism policy is the very real recognition in our government that terrorists don't respect traditional borders or nation-states. We know very well that they exploit ungoverned and under-governed areas as places for safe haven, as places to rest, to recruit, to train, to plan operations. So we believe that it's for this very reason that a regional approach to counterterrorism is essential. So we have been working with our partners in the world on regional strategies to break up terrorist networks, to eliminate safe havens, and to disrupt those activities that support the terrorists. Those activities that require disruption include not only the murderous acts that they perpetrate, but also their funding, their facilitation of travel, their communications, their recruitment efforts, and their intelligence and information collection.

In the report, after a brief discussion of safe havens, Chapter 5 of the report provides information about the various tools that we're using to address this challenge. Here at the State Department, we have developed the Regional Strategic Initiatives, the RSIs, as key tools wherein we seek to develop flexible regional networks among states and among our missions in those states to develop those common regional approaches that we think they need, common regional approaches that are going to lessen the gaps that the bad guys use to do their work. So in those RSIs, we work with our ambassadors and interagency representatives in key terrorist theaters of operation, and we collectively assess the threat, we pool resources available through those missions and through the interagency, and we devise collaborative strategies and policy recommendations to our leadership here.

We also use capacity-building tools such as antiterrorism assistance and counterterrorist finance training. In the area of capacity building, some of our partners have the political will, but lack the capabilities that are necessary to mount effective counterterrorist efforts. So the State Department's Antiterrorism Assistance Program has provided partner countries with training,

with equipment, and with technology. And in the 25 years of that program, which we celebrated last fall, ATA, the shorthand name for the program, has trained almost 6,000 foreign government officials from 151 countries in those 25 years. Now each ATA program is tailored to the needs of each partner nation and tailored to local conditions, and we think that that specific tailoring does much to enhance the capabilities of that particular government to deal with the people involved and to deal with terrorist financing in those countries.

We also judge that we've made a great deal of progress in building an international consensus to fight terrorism, and we've done so over the last several years, and this work continues through UN conventions, through restricting terrorists' freedom of movement, and through blocking terrorists' assets. But of course, we always need to make sure that all of those commitments stay current and that all of those commitments are fully implemented.

Economic and development assistance, education, and public diplomacy are also crucial to effective counterterrorism efforts. We continue to believe that, at least in the great majority of cases, that people who have positive options to build a better life will choose those positive options. And in that sense, foreign assistance is another vital component of our efforts to address the conditions that terrorists exploit for recruitment and for ideological purposes. So USG assistance programs that have some effect in ameliorating those conditions include, of course, our various USAID programs, the Middle East Partnership Initiative, and the work of the Millennium Challenge Corporation. Those programs, of course, increase access to education, especially for women, and improved health care, and they also, of course, further democratic and economic reform.

As we look at the phenomenon of terrorism, it's important to keep in mind the morphing nature of the challenge. We are still engaged with a decentralized, a highly adaptable foe, that has a professional and fairly sophisticated propaganda machine they seek with great frequency to exploit the media, especially the internet, for their purposes. So we're working with the international community, again, with governments and international organizations, with local political leaders, with academics, with religious leaders, with other community leaders. And we must work together to counter terrorist propaganda and misinformation and disinformation much more effectively.

To do so, of course, means carrying out a successful strategic communications program. To do so allows us to assure allies of our commitment to deter adversaries as well. Now, as you know, terrorist organizations seek to use the media to reach sympathetic audiences, to recruit new followers, to intimidate their opponents locally, and, of course, to conduct good old-fashioned disinformation campaigns as mentioned previously. Some of them use sophisticated, modern methods of communication and public relations, and they seek, in many instances, to segment their audience and to adapt their message to those various segments as they deem appropriate. That said, Usama bin Ladin and Dr. Zawahiri appear to be in a position now of responding to events rather than driving events. It seems to us that that's especially the case for the latter half of 2008.

So as I close these introductory remarks, let me emphasize that the magnitude and the breadth of the terrorist threat make clear that no one country, no one organization can alone defeat terrorism. The global threat that we face requires a global strategy, a global response, collaborative strategies, action plans, and policies that use all of the tools of statecraft, nationally, bilaterally, regionally, and multilaterally. We really have no alternative if we want a successful approach.

So we've come a long way since 2001. So together, we've moved, and are moving, and will continue to move to overcome some of the impediments to pursuing terrorists that existed prior to 9/11. And the United States will continue to work closely with our partners around the world to identify areas where there's still work to be done and ways in which we can collaborate even more effectively. And again, it's only through such cooperation that we can succeed. Thank you very much.

MR. TRAVERS: Good afternoon. Each year, the National Counterterrorism Center compiles the statistical data in support of State for the Country Reports. What I'll do is go through about seven or eight PowerPoint that lay out the numbers at a pretty high level. I would encourage you to take a look at the website. It has all of the underlying incident data, as well as charts, some graphs, and the methodology if you want to parse the numbers in any different way. Next please.

In compiling this kind of data, (inaudible) are everything, so I would encourage you to take a look at the statutory definition that we use – note, premeditated, politically motivated violence directed against noncombatants for political ends by subnational groups. It's a very, very broad definition. It would include things like an insurgent attack against a Syrian. It would not include a Taliban attack against ISAF force in Afghanistan, for instance. So you need to understand those distinctions.

We've used that definition now for the last four years. You can see the data from 2005 to 2008 on the bar charts – incidents on the left, fatalities on the right. And you'll note that in 2008, we catalogued something less than 12,000 incidents and 16,000 fatalities. Those represent, respectively, declines of 20 percent in incidents and 30 percent fatalities. And certainly, we'd prefer to see the numbers going down. I would note, however, that global incident tolls are not of particular use for metric as it says on the bottom. Why? Because invariably they include different groups with different motivations and different agendas. So you really have to parse the data and disaggregate, look at regional and country specifics, so that's what we'll turn to. Next please.

First of all, at the regional level, we've broken it out by individual region. You'll note, first of all, that the decline of 20 percent is largely as a result of that first red bar on the left-hand side. The declines that occurred in the Near East, those are principally declines that occurred in Iraq. Second major point, you'll notice that the Southeast Asia and Near East are roughly identical in 2008, and they accounted for about 75 percent of total incidents. All of the regions pale in comparison in terms of the numbers. We did see slight declines in Africa, East Asia, the Western Hemisphere, slight gains in Europe, Eurasia, and that's primarily Russia. And I'll talk to each one of these. Let's turn to the main country drivers first. Next please.

First on Iraq, you'll notice that in '06 and '07, roughly equivalent and then they drop off dramatically in 2008. There was actually a more complicated dynamic going on, as you can see in that lower right-hand chart. What we actually saw was a pretty significant ramp up in 2006 and pretty significant ramp downward in 2007. That continued in 2008. It actually continued through the first quarter in 2009. We have seen something of an uptick here in the last month or so in April. You'll also notice that Iraq, as a percentage of global incidents in the upper right-hand corner, has diminished significantly from half or more down to roughly a third in 2008.

And lastly, on that map in the lower left-hand corner, you'll notice that attacks were pretty concentrated in three provinces: Baghdad, Diyala and Nineva. Roughly 70 percent of the attacks in 2008 occurred in those three provinces. The corresponding number in 2007 would have been about 60 percent, so they're getting more concentrated in a smaller area. Next please.

South Asia, and here, you'll notice the different colors of the bars. We're trying to differentiate between those attacks which were Sunni extremist in nature, and that would be a darker blue; and the lighter blue would be groups that were more secular political, for instance. In the case of the upper left-hand corner, Afghanistan, the numbers certainly did grow. I'll tell you that we believe we probably have undercounting in Afghanistan. We can document problems with reporting in Afghanistan that lead us to believe that the number in 2008 was actually higher. Pakistan, as you've heard many times over the last several weeks, we've seen the greatest growth. In the case of the light blue, that's largely Baloch insurgency. That's been going on for a very long time. The significant growth has occurred in the Sunni extremist attacks over the last couple years, in particular. Those are largely in the northwestern part of Pakistan. I'll show you on a map here in a second.

In the case of India, the numbers have actually gone down. But right about here would be in Asam, in the far eastern part of the country or the (inaudible) the Maoists in north central. The declines have occurred as a result of the diminished violence in Kashmir. However, the far fewer Sunni extremists attacks that we saw in 2008 actually drove fatalities upward, and that's because we saw some spectacular attacks by (inaudible) Mujahideen and LET while leading up to Mumbai, of course, (inaudible). The graphs are a little bit abstract, so let me put this on a map. Next please.

We worked with the ODNI Open Source Center to geospatially depict the data. And what you've got – this is largely Baloch. Focus up here right along the Afghan-Pak border. This is the FATA. What we had were, roughly in 2006, (inaudible) attacks that occurred in the FATA, and we had about 28 attacks in the Northwest Frontier Province. So just make a mental image of that. This is Peshawar right here. Not many attacks at the south. Put up the next one please.

And that's 2008. The numbers grew dramatically. In the FATA, we're now looking at over 300 attacks, and in the Northwest Frontier Province, over 800 attacks. So you get a sense of the concern that has been expressed as a result of this movement to the east of Taliban-related attacks. So again --

QUESTION: I'm sorry, could you repeat that one quickly?

MR. TRAVERS: Sure. The FATA numbers grew from 61 attacks to 321. Northwest Frontier Province attacks from 28 to 870. Next please.

Real quickly, a few rest of the world highlights, sort of reading from left to right. Upper left-hand corner, in the United States, obviously no major attacks; 33 Americans did lose their lives, 21 of them, I believe, in Iraq, six as a result of the Mumbai attacks, Afghanistan, Yemen and Sudan, other American fatalities.

QUESTION: Sudan?

MR. TRAVERS: The – one, January. Yes, one January of last year.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.)

MR. TRAVERS: Yeah, that was AQ (inaudible), I think. (Inaudible) in Colombia, some pretty good news here over the last four years. Again, we've seen attacks decline from roughly 800 down to about 300, as the FARC has been far less effective over the last several years. Moving to the Middle East and North Africa – the ambassador mentioned Algeria – attacks are down. However, as you noted, we see more suicide bombings. I think the most spectacular suicide bombing in Algerian history was last year. We also see them taking credit – AQIM taking credit for attacks outside of Algeria, in Mauritania and Tunisia.

We saw far more rocket attacks, of course, into Israel. There was virtually nothing in Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, good news there. Also, as the ambassador mentioned, a significant increase in the number of attacks in Yemen. The story for the most part in Russia, in Europe and Eurasia has been in Russia and is primarily in the Caucasus. The Caucasus Emirate that was declared by MRF in the latter part of 2007, we saw far more attacks in the southern part of Russia and many of them attributed to the Caucasus Emirate.

South into Africa, here is where we undoubtedly have the greatest problems with reporting. Nevertheless, we do think we see increasingly lethal attacks associated with Al-Shabaab in Somalia, Lord's Resistance Army as well.

And then over to Asia, attacks in the southern part of Thailand down by about a half. Nothing major in Indonesia. Jemaah Islamiyah, which was so potent several years ago, did almost nothing last year. More attacks in the Philippines, but these were primarily Communists. They were not in any sense MILF or ASG and so on.

And lastly, a few attacks in China. These were back during the Olympics. The East Turkestan Islamic Movement conducted a few attacks. The chart on the lower left-hand side you'll see gives you a sense, when you normalize for Iraq, back Iraq out of the equation, we do see a slow steady increase in attacks and fatalities around the world outside of Iraq. Next please.

Lastly, if we wrap up with a little bit on attack methods and the associated human toll, the Ambassador mentioned suicide bombings, the – from 2007 to 2008, we saw a decline of about 20 percent. We were a little over 500 attacks globally in 2007, down to about 400 in 2008, and again, that was because of declines in Iraq, that dark blue color.

We're conducting about 12 countries. That's about what we've seen consistently, 12 to 14 countries each year. The continued adaptation, the tactical adaptation by terrorist groups is of note. Whereas they may try to use suicide bombers in vehicles as the security protocols get more difficult to get around, they may switch to bicycles or they may switch to pedestrians with suicide belts. If adult males can't get through security, then they may switch to children or women. We saw almost 10 percent of the global attacks were by women last year, large numbers in Iraq.

If you'll note the chart on the lower left-hand side, suicide bombings, while they get a lot of attention, are actually a relatively small percentage of terrorist attacks. Far more common are armed attacks and bombings, and these truly span a very broad spectrum of technological sophistication. On the one extreme, we saw Mumbai, where we saw many of the attributes of globalization – GPS and Google Earth and laptops and relatively robust communications. On the other extreme, the most lethal attack last year was actually by the Lord's Resistance Army – conducted attacks in the Democratic Republic of Congo the week after Christmas, killing six or seven hundred people largely with machetes. So you get the sense of the span.

One other note in terms of attack methods. Kidnappings up pretty significantly, at least kidnappings for ransom up pretty significantly. And these are in the countries you would expect – in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq, primarily. We don't have a good handle on how much ransom was collected. We know that the money is being utilized for conducting terrorist attacks. We are certainly in the many tens of millions of dollars.

And lastly, it all comes back to the human toll, something like 50,000 people total in 2008 killed or wounded. And as we've seen consistently over the last several years, Muslims are disproportionately represented in that total. There's no question in our mind that well over 50 percent of all victims were Muslim and they were largely killed by Islamic extremists. And that's all I've got.

Sir.

QUESTION: Can you give us a numerical breakdown for the total number of attacks in Pakistan and in Afghanistan '08 versus '07, and the number of fatalities for Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq?

MR. TRAVERS: Pakistan, 890 incidents in 2007 killed 1,340 people; 2008, 1,839 incidents killing 2,293 people.

QUESTION: Twenty two –

MR. TRAVERS: 2,293. Afghanistan 2007, we counted 1,125 incidents killing 1,961 people; 2008, 1,220 incidents killing 1,989 people. As I mentioned, we do believe that we've undercounted Afghanistan. We just don't have data as a result of reporting challenges.

I'm sorry. You asked for another country?

QUESTION: Yeah. Iraq, please.

MR. TRAVERS: Iraq 2007, 6,210 incidents, 13,606 people; 2008, 3,258 incidents killing 5,016 people.

QUESTION: How many was that?

MR. TRAVERS: 5,016.

QUESTION: But what do you consider -- I'm sorry. What do you consider an incident? I mean --

MR. TRAVERS: An incident, occur --

QUESTION: When you say there was this many incidents, are -- you know, I mean, it doesn't -- does it have to rise to a certain level to be considered an incident or --

MR. TRAVERS: Sure. An IED that goes off is an incident. If there's a beheading, it's an incident. If there's an armed attack, it's an incident.

QUESTION: Okay.

QUESTION: What does the spike in Pakistan -- how concerning is that? And what do you think it shows?

MR. TRAVERS: Do you want to --

MR. SCHLICHER: Can I?

MR. TRAVERS: Sure, please.

MR. SCHLICHER: I think the spike in Pakistan represents one of the reasons why the President and the Secretary have chosen to devote an enormous amount of political attention and an enormous amount of diplomatic activity and resources to the question of Pakistan, Afghanistan. I mean, as recently as yesterday, of course, President Obama spoke to the situation in Pakistan. Secretary Clinton in her recent Hill testimony did as well. Ambassador Holbrooke, of course, has been enormously active in this, his portfolio.

The situation of Pakistan and Afghanistan and what to do about it has been identified as one of the very highest priorities of the Administration. We've been very active, of course, on the counterterrorism front. We've been very active on the diplomatic front as well, including by soliciting the support of the international community to actually help the Pakistanis and help the Afghans meet their needs across the board. Because, again, we think that that holistic approach to the problems is the only way that we're actually going to succeed. We have to deploy the full panoply of diplomatic tools to address the problem, and that's exactly what's happening.

QUESTION: James Bays from Al Jazeera English, on the same subject.

MR. SCHLICHER: Yes.

QUESTION: It started in the tribal areas of Pakistan. And I appreciate that this report only goes up to the end of 2008, but clearly, things are moving very, very fast there. I'd like your assessment of the situation on the ground, but not just in terms of attacks taking place in that area, but as a staging post for attacks elsewhere in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Given how fast-moving it is, how worried are you about the situation in western Pakistan?

MR. SCHLICHER: I think the President used the word "grave" to describe the situation on the ground in Pakistan. Obviously, the presentation that Russ gave you, the visuals and the numbers, really underscores the magnitude of the threat. And you can see from the numbers that threat has actually been escalating. So, of course, we're deeply concerned, and we're addressing it. We're going to have to find ways to again address the situation across the board, not only our help but the help of the international community, in giving the Pakistani Government the capability to actually address these immediate security problems, and giving the Pakistani Government the tools it needs to address the broader issues in which these sorts of terrorism issues thrive.

QUESTION: I wasn't just talking about – I wasn't just talking about the attacks there, though. But given what's going on there and the instability, how does that increase the ability to – we have a staging post for other attacks much wider afield.

MR. SCHLICHER: That's a great concern as well. And to the extent that that may be one of the places where al-Qaida's senior leadership is and operates from, and to the extent that al-Qaida has not just local ambitions there in that area, but global ambitions, the concern that you raise is a very real one.

QUESTION: Well, can I – can I follow up on that, Ron? I mean, so, obviously, the amount of attacks have increased and that's concerning. But are you more concerned about the fact that al-Qaida is able to, you know, have a safe haven there and plot the attacks against the U.S., the West and others, than specifically that the – what the numbers show in terms of the amount of attacks? I mean, you can't really quantify that at this point, can you?

MR. SCHLICHER: Well, I mean, we can certainly quantify the number of attacks --

QUESTION: Right.

MR. SCHLICHER: -- as you've seen. We can certainly come up with the very clear concept that al-Qaida's senior leadership and many of the nodes of the activities of that leadership take place in that region. What's hard to quantify is whether those al-Qaida types in that region -- the scale of their plotting in that region and other regions. That's just -- that's very, very hard to get at. I mean, I think that we have a very real sense that it's happening. But, of course, we have very imperfect knowledge of actually what they are doing in their inner councils.

QUESTION: But I mean, is that -- is the fact that you know that they have a safe haven in Pakistan to plot or to move around or to communicate, is that more concerning to you as a terrorist threat than the number of attacks that you see launched on Pakistani soil?

MR. SCHLICHER: I think that they're equal concerns.

QUESTION: You mentioned Caucasus Emirate right now from Caucasus.

MR. SCHLICHER: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: So we have in Caucasus right now three separatist regimes. And in 2007 report, you indicated them as a black holes. So what's your assessment for this year's?

And also, there was a concern regarding the border of Armenia and Iran, so Iran can get some weapons and nuclear facilities from this -- it's not protected very well. So what's assessment for the 2008?

MR. SCHLICHER: Obviously, that's a part of the world that has lots of conflicts, many of which are being addressed in current diplomatic efforts. And I think that the best answer I can give you is we need to make sure that those diplomatic efforts succeed, and that people find the compromises that are going to create the political will for people to cooperate together and not be satisfied with the status quo of nursing ancient grievances and resorting to violence, et cetera.

I think I probably should leave it at that, because these issues are actually being handled in great depth by our regional bureaus. And I think that they are actually better positioned to give you more detail than that.

QUESTION: I have a question for Mr. Travers on the recent --

MR. TRAVERS: Please.

QUESTION: -- in Iraq about -- I realize this is outside the timeframe of this report, but the last six weeks or so, do you have any statistics? And at this point, can you draw any conclusions? Does it look like a blip, or does it look like a rebound?

MR. TRAVERS: It's way too soon to tell, I think. There certainly has been declaration by AQI leaders that they wanted to conduct increased numbers of attacks. And I think it's fair to say that

the numbers of attacks and fatalities that we've seen in the last month or so are going to be higher than that which we saw on average over the last three months or six months. We're – quite honestly, we tend to lag by a month or two in terms of our cataloging of data, so it would be too soon for me to tell you kind of what that data means yet.

QUESTION: Hi, Mary Beth Sheridan from *The Washington Post*. For the Assistant Secretary, on a very different subject –

MR. SCHLICHER: Yes.

QUESTION: -- the language on Cuba in the section on state sponsors of terrorism, it's quite a lot less harsh than last year. And I'm wondering if this is sort of laying the groundwork for taking Cuba off the list of state sponsored terrorists.

MR. SCHLICHER: Actually, I don't think this report is laying the groundwork for anything, because this report is intended as, in a very real sense, a snapshot of the terrorism-related activities for each country for the year 2008. So the narrative as you see it, in fact, represents that snapshot.

MR. AKER: This gentlemen here.

MR. SCHLICHTER: Yes, sir.

QUESTION: Mr. Assistant Secretary, while we're talking about the terrorism across borders, I need to ask you what would you consider these aggressive operations that the Israeli settlers are carrying out against the Syrians in their little villages in the Golan Heights, cutting their trees, crops, and their attacks in Hebron against civilians, their attacks in Jerusalem against civilians to actually eradicate them from their houses – isn't that another form of terrorism that needs to be included in your initiative that you have indicated to in the beginning concerning the Middle East initiative and helping people – helping to prevent what are emotions or reasons to – that would help the radicals and the terrorists to use as reasons for their terrorism in the areas. Well, these kind of operations by Israeli settlers are stirring lots of emotions that could work against all the programs that we might have against terrorism.

MR. SCHLICHER: Thanks for the question.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. SCHLICHER: I think that the best answer to the question is that the sorts of issues that you laid out along with many other issues dealing with the Middle East are only going to be solved by engagement in a successful political process. The President very early on in his tenure appointed Senator Mitchell to be the point person for that process. As you know, he's been very active indeed. And I'm sure that he is going to continue to be very active in pointing the way forward.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: (Inaudible.) I also have a country-specific question. First, on Colombia, I mean, some people have seen that the FARC, the insurgents, are weakened there. And, you know, I haven't seen any reports that the narcotic trade is less strong. So I wonder if you could explain why maybe there is a weakening of the FARC.

And then on Spain as well, in the report you mentioned that there is increasing activity by Islamic insurgents in Spain. I wonder if you could explain a little bit, I mean, why Spain – what do they have there, what kind of activities?

And finally, if I may –

MR. SCHLICHER: You want me to do three? (Laughter.)

QUESTION: No, on Spain as well. I mean, there a big problem is ETA, which is also – there's also reports of weakening of ETA, and I wonder if you can comment on that. So Colombia and Spain.

MR. SCHLICHER: Okay. First of all, on Colombia and the FARC, I think that in recent years, including 2008, that there's been significant progress in going after the FARC. That progress, I think, begins with the political will of the Government of Colombia, and it also includes the various efforts at capacity building that this government and others have extended to the Government of Colombia over the years as well. So while we think that there has been progress, we think that there still very much is a problem there. And the problem includes the violent activities, the terrorism that the FARC actually practices against the people of Colombia. And, of course, as you know, it includes kidnapping of foreigners as well, including the American hostages who were released last year.

I would also note that there are other countries that provide space for FARC members and FARC sympathizers to seek safe haven in, and we continue to see that as a big diplomatic problem as well.

And I'm sorry. The question on Spain again?

QUESTION: On Spain – so Islamic presence there, terrorists, and ETA. So you can comment on –

MR. SCHLICHER: Okay. I hope we're making a distinction between an Islamic presence, meaning the presence of Muslim people in the country, and --

QUESTION: Oh, no, of course. I mean, of course.

MR. SCHLICHER: Right. Because they are very different things. Well, Spain, of course, in a sense, lives in a neighborhood where there are lots of people who are – that are sympathetic, at

least, to foreign terrorist organizations. The biggest problem we see in Spain terrorism-wise remains the question of ETA. So I think that the proper focus that I should put on the report on Spain, in fact, still is ETA. And maybe you should keep a watching brief on the others. And, frankly, I probably need to study it a little more, too.

QUESTION: Sir, you're saying that there are some neighbors of Colombia that provide a space to the FARC, to the members of the FARC to move. Which countries are you talking about specifically? And is there any confirmed link between the Venezuelan Government and the FARC or support?

MR. SCHLICHER: Well, Cuba, of course, remains on the state sponsors list. And Cuba does tolerate the presence of members of terrorist groups, including the FARC, including the Colombia National Liberation Army, and, in fact, ETA. We also note that the Venezuelan leader has praised the FARC on many occasions as well. We think that's extremely problematic. You don't go around praising a foreign terrorist organization.

QUESTION: And what about Ecuador?

MR. SCHLICHER: Ecuador – I have to say I don't have – I don't have information on that with me.

MR. AKER: Any other questions? Okay.

MR. SCHLICHER: Please.

QUESTION: If I could – it's mentioned in the beginning of the report about – it says the Government of Iran has continued to pursue an expansion of its military ties into the Western Hemisphere and parts of Africa, including through the Qods Force. I just wanted to clarify, is the Qods Force active in the Western Hemisphere, or is that Africa?

MR. SCHLICHER: The Qods Force, of course, is kind of an elite unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and they're deeply involved in the really objectionable and terrorist activities in those places where Iran chooses to be active. The great area of concern, of course, is the Middle East itself. Lebanon, very much so. Iraq over the last several years and continuing until now, very much so. We are still troubled by indications that the Iranians may be seeking to extend their influence into other parts of the world.

I think I probably should leave it there, because this is an unclassified briefing and I'm not sure what I should say and shouldn't say.

QUESTION: Can I just follow up, though? Are you suggesting that they're – I mean, we know about the Argentine, you know, talks and all that stuff.

MR. SCHLICHER: Right.

QUESTION: But are you suggesting that they're involved in terrorist activity in the hemisphere?

MR. SCHLICHER: I haven't suggested that.

QUESTION: Okay.

QUESTION: So, I mean – I'm sorry, just one last thing. Obviously, Iran has been engaged in, you know, commercial ties and that sort of thing in the hemisphere. That is obvious.

MR. SCHLICHER: Yes.

QUESTION: Is this what that's referring to?

MR. SCHLICHER: A reference to the Qods Force wouldn't be that reference.

QUESTION: Right.

MR. SCHLICHER: Yes, ma'am.

QUESTION: The report said that the United States remained concerned that Hezbollah and Hamas sympathize as well, raising funds in the tri-border area in South America. But therefore, however, there – these are Islamic extremist groups, there is no corroboration information about it – corroboration information about it. Can you say something about it?

And to go to Argentina, can you say something about its efforts in order to condemn the Iranian people about the AMIA bombs?

MR. SCHLICHER: I'm sorry, I didn't get the last part of your question.

QUESTION: About Argentina, can you say something about its efforts in order to condemn the Iranian people who were involved in the AMIA --

MR. SCHLICHER: To try them?

QUESTION: Mm-hmm.

MR. SCHLICHER: Yeah. Well, obviously, any judicial action against those suspected of terrorist acts, especially such heinous ones as the AMIA attack, are something that we very much support.

On the tri-border area itself, that's a good example of a geographical location where the states involved don't necessarily have the sort of full writ and authority that they might have in the other parts of their country and where all sorts of criminal activity, terrorism as well, can likely

try to go because of the lack of that writ. This has been a standing concern for some years now, as you've probably seen in earlier versions of the report.

QUESTION: But you still have no confirmed information about these groups having activities there?

MR. SCHLICHER: You read the report.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR. AKER: Okay, (inaudible) a couple more questions. Let's go to the back.

MR. SCHLICHER: Yes, ma'am.

QUESTION: Yes, thank you. We all understand North Korea is not a terrorist country today, but judging from their latest behavior on the missile launching and their nuclear possession, how would you define the country? Maybe pre-terrorist or something?

MR. SCHLICHER: Actually, we would not connect the launching of the missile with the question of terrorism. Obviously, it's – the launching of the missile was a matter of grave concern, but we don't think it is specifically a counterterrorism issue.

As you know, North Korea's designation as a state sponsor was rescinded on October 11th last year. That rescission decision required that North Korea had not provided any support for international terrorism during the preceding six-month period prior to that decision and required undertakings that they would not do so in the future.

QUESTION: (Off-mike.)

MR. SCHLICHER: The State Department is in the process of reviewing the DPRK's status as what they call a not fully cooperating country. That review is part of a broader process of identifying countries not fully cooperating. And decisions in that whole process, including North Korea, should be coming in the next few weeks for you.

Yes, ma'am.

QUESTION: If Venezuela's government is permissive, as you say, with the FARC, and the FARC is a terrorist group, how come that Venezuela is not included in the list of the countries that support terrorism? And do you think that if Venezuela is still supporting the FARC, that can happen? Or is there any chance that happen under the Obama Administration?

MR. SCHLICHER: Again, thanks for the question. In May last year, Venezuela was recertified as one of those not fully cooperating countries. And that comes under Section 40(a) of the Arms Export Control Act, which you're probably not interested in that part. Again, we're reviewing that designation as a not fully cooperating country as part of the overall process of

looking at those countries. And we should have decisions in that entire process in the near future.

QUESTION: Can I just ask one more rather broad question on Pakistan? In terms of the sharp increase in attacks, can one generalize, particularly about these Sunni extremist ones? Is this – you know, is it to undermine the government? Is it to reduce confidence in the government? I mean, how do you explain that jump in those attacks?

MR. SCHLICHER: I think it's probably a combination of many motivations and factors. I would say that those people who have had safe haven in a certain region probably very much want to keep their safe haven and to keep legitimate authorities from coming and exercising the writ in those places. I think that groups like al-Qaida and others don't benefit from having a strong central Pakistani Government that's able fully to exercise its powers to keep law and order and to prevent terrorism in those places. I think those two motivations probably are what are guiding the thought of the bad guys in the FATA.

MR. AKER: Thank you, everyone.

MR. SCHLICHER: Okay, thank you.

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